

CULTURAL POLITICS

California Dreaming and the Radical Imagination

Janet Owen Driggs | April 21, 2016



Still from "An Ecstatic Experience" by Ja'Tovia Gary, 2015. | Image: Courtesy of Erin Christovale/Black Radical Imagination.

Like wildflowers after rain, the phrase “radical imagination” is popping up everywhere. Last year, artists in Portland organized "Radical Imagination Gymnasium;" in February Culver City's Agape Center held "Abolition and the Radical Imagination," a discussion featuring Angela Davis, Fred Moten, Melanie Cervantes, and Robin D.G. Kelley; the Radical Imagination Project recently hosted a Free School in Halifax; and "Black Radical Imagination," a program of experimental shorts co-curated by Erin Christovale and Amir George, screened at MOCA in mid-March.

In a city that values imagination as a profit-boosting tool and in our era dominated by market logic -- when any response to the invitation “imagine” is inevitably colored by plastic rainbows of consumer fantasy -- it seems we have a new term to describe the capacity to foster unorthodox thoughts and make them real.

“The radical imagination is alive and well in Skid Row,” said Los Angeles Poverty

Department (LAPD) founder John Malpede at the Culver City conversation. “If it weren’t for this radical imagination and resistance, Skid Row would have been bulldozed long ago.”



Workout #1: Visionary Fiction by Walidah Imarisha, from the "Radical Imagination Gymnasium," a project by Erin Charpentier, Zachary Gough, Travis Neel, and Patricia Vazquez Gomez. | Photo: Courtesy of Radical Imagination Gymnasium.

What’s so great about preserving Skid Row? Herein lies the crux; for radical imagination is not only a matter of dreaming possible futures, it’s the capacity to collectively imagine and practice ways of being together that refuse the assumptions and ideologies of the status quo. In the case of Skid Row, that means declining the logic of profit, which consistently criminalizes poverty and devalues the “biggest recovery community anywhere” in an effort to maximize a real-estate bonanza.

For 30 years the “LAPD that we love,” as Davis described it, has used theater and other arts to put “the narrative of the neighborhood... in the hands of neighborhood people.” The resulting celebrations of mutuality, cooperation, and care, which both example and value status quo-challenging social relations, make it harder to replace existing poor residents with “wealthy working people [who]... shouldn’t have to see the pain, struggle, and despair of [the] homeless.”

Although the phrase “radical imagination” is only now becoming common -- due largely to the influence of Robin D.G. Kelley’s book "Freedom Dreams: The Black

Radical Imagination" (2003) and Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish's "Radical Imagination" (2014) -- the power it describes is hardly new. It is, writes Kelley, "a most miraculous weapon with no birth date, no expiration date, no trademark," while Haiven and Khasnabish point to Ancient Greek debates on imagination as a political force, and to the Romantic poets, who saw imagination as "a key means of resisting and critiquing the status quo."



L.A. Poverty Department performing at "Abolition and the Radical Imagination." | Photo: J.P. Owen Driggs.

More recently, and in our own back yard, radical imagination flourished with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Founded in Chicago in June 1905 and active in L.A. by March 1906, the "Wobblies" rejected not only electoral politics and centralized authority, but also, as historian-poet-surrealist Franklin Rosemont has written: the "various middle-class forms of Marxism... that held sway... at the time."

Fighting class war with direct action, the IWW established a network of "Mixed Locals" across the U.S. and Canada. Comprising of white industrial workers as well as the people of color, unemployed, unskilled, immigrant, and migratory workers rejected by mainstream labor, the Mixed Locals often lacked industrial muscle. What they had instead was solidarity, a vital sense that "we're *all* leaders," and commitment to "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."

The nerve centers of the network were hundreds of Wobbly Halls where, according

to Rosemont, the Wobs "planned new organizing drives and walkouts; wrote poems, songs, leaflets, pamphlets and articles... and almost every evening, enjoyed good entertainment." With Halls at Second and Los Angeles streets, Eighth and S. San Pedro, and Fourth and State, the entertainment in L.A. may well have included "There is Power in a Union" sung by its author, IWW poet and sometime-San Pedro longshoreman Joe Hill.



Sheet music for Joe Hill's "The Rebel Girl," 1915. | Image: Wikipedia/Creative Commons License.

Although the Wobbly songbook remains in print, and troubadours like Tom Morello follow in Hill's wake, it's not the power and longevity of its songs that make the IWW such a good example of radical imagination in action. Rather, it's the fact that their production and reproduction were integral to the development of shared visions of the future. In addition, with an uncompromising commitment to solidarity across lines of difference, the Wobblies brought those imagined futures, unlike "pie in the sky," into the present. As Malpede said in a recent interview: "The radical is grounded in what's really going on."

But what is really going on? Despite the work of the IWW and its descendants, doesn't capitalism's continued ubiquity suggest that imagination more often functions to preserve status quo than to bring about radical change? The question "why?" could keep philosophers busy for years, but it's worth noting that a primary tool for preservation involves putting old jam in new jelly jars. In other words, while the surfaces of things change all the time -- from pop to hip-hop say, or from Republican to Democrat -- the underlying distributions of power do not.



Reprint of the IWW Songbook, 1923 edition, on sale at L.A. Zine Fest, March 2016. | Photo: Frederick Portillo.

By simultaneously absorbing public attention, stimulating markets, and blunting desires for genuine transformation, the "jelly jar technique" offers a win-win-win for

status quo. Which is perhaps why impresarios Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young recently invested \$70 million in nurturing “disruption.” Synonymous with “commotion,” disruption can be defined as the use of individual imaginations to invent those “revolutionary” new containers that keep the surface churning.

Rather than defining imagination as an individual possession and limiting it, like some newly shorn Sampson, to surfaces alone; radical imagination is a dynamic collective process that deals in root causes and root-level change.

More various than bourgeois cultural forms, which frequently traffic in surface commotion, examples of radical imagination abound in 20th century California. Like diamonds formed by pressure and heat they have arisen where people have the least to lose and the most to gain from social transformation. El Teatro Campesino, propaganda arm of the National Farmworkers Association, comes immediately to mind, as does the visual identity of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP).



"El Teatro Campesino portrays three grapes in their *acto* -- green (table grapes), red (wine grapes), and a shriveled grape (raisin). Let it never be said El Teatro lacked for imagination." | Photo: Courtesy of The Library, University of California San Diego/Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.

Rather as a blooming flower indicates the presence of a healthy root system, these examples are bedded in larger movements for change. El Teatro for example, which sprouted from the Farmworker Movement in Delano in 1965, grew increasingly prominent in the larger Chicano movement when its collectively authored *actos* started to include such issues as “bilingual education... violence... [and] the war in Vietnam.” While the BPP, which formed in Oakland in 1966, found common cause

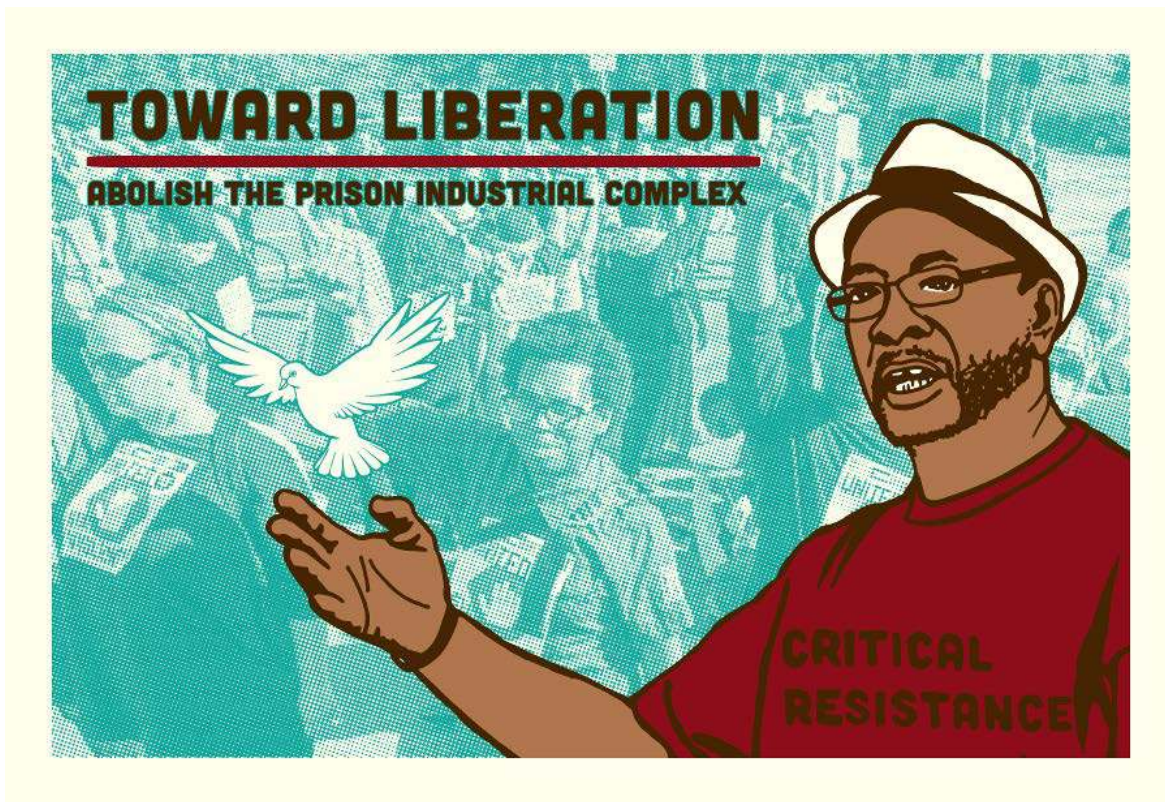
with international and local allies, including the Cuban government, the Brown Berets, white migrant workers, as well as the many other insurgent practices and communities that comprised the Black movement.

BPP minister of culture Emory Douglas created and maintained the BPP's visual identity via the newspaper he designed and produced, which invariably included his poster-sized images. "Illustrating conditions that made revolution seem necessary; and constructing a visual mythology of power," the publication spoke to both lived experience and a better future, which the Panthers sought to bring into the present via "Survival Programs." As Billy X Jennings, the BPP's "unofficial historian," explained in a 2013 radio interview: "One thing people do appreciate is, you talk about change, you have to show them change; and our change came through the programs we had." These included patrols to defend communities against police harassment, free breakfast and clothing programs, and "eleven free medical clinics, two of which are still open to this very day."

"Social movements are animated by the radical imagination," write Haiven and Khasnabish. But these examples also suggest that, when radical imagination finds expression in cultural forms, they become truly potent only in the context of social movements. Bereft of living roots, in other words, even a flower may become "commotion."

Turning to the present, Dignidad Rebelde is an Oakland-based collaboration of Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes, which updates the aesthetic and political heritage of Emory Douglas. Influenced by his distinctive thick outlines and pattern/plain combinations, Dignidad Rebelde's prints "translate people's stories into art that can be put back into the hands of the communities who inspire it."

Although Dignidad Rebelde works with many social justice organizations, the most relevant in terms of radical imagination is Critical Resistance (CR), which ex-Panther Angela Davis co-founded in 1998. Understanding that shared beliefs give rise to reality, CR seeks "to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe." Stimulating new thoughts about security, CR's radical vision of safety based on social justice is starting to displace the chains that clank through our public imaginaries.



Critical Resistance postcard distributed at “Abolition and the Radical Imagination” by Melanie Cervantes/Dignidad Rebelde. | Image: Courtesy of Critical Resistance.

In a recent telephone conversation for a contemporary exemplar of radical imagination, curator Erin Christovale cited Ja’Tovia Gary’s “An Ecstatic Experience” (2015). Juxtaposing an Alice Coltrane soundtrack with footage of Black Lives Matter actions in Baltimore, a monologue by actress and activist Ruby Dee about “a woman mentally liberating herself out of slavery,” and found footage of Black church services, the film speaks, said Christovale, “to ways in which American Black experience comes through and comes together.” “Radical imagination,” she continued, “connotes something outside of what activism typically looks like.”

In “Freedom Dreams, Black Radical Imagination,” which supplied the title for Christovale and George’s program, Robin Kelley asks: “How do we produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom?” Censuring “the same old protest politics,” he points toward surrealism and its “Dreams of the Marvelous.”

“Contrary to popular belief, Surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought,” writes Kelley. And, while the surrealists are “strongly influenced by Marx and Freud in their efforts to bridge the gap between dream and action,” by “turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice,” they “take us to places where Marxism, anarchism, and other ‘isms’ in the name of revolution have rarely dared to venture.”



Still from "The Kitchen" by Alile Sharon Larkin, 1975. | Image: UCLAFilmTVArchive on YouTube.

In 1943, Martinican theorist Suzanne Césaire wrote: “Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid antinomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages.” Can at land’s edge, “an experimental platform for visual research,” be described as surrealist? Evoking a cliff that is not a cliff after all but a slow slide underwater, the poetry of its name suggests that possibility.

Initiated by Michelle Dizon in Los Angeles in 2015, at land’s edge is a 10-week learning structure that seeks “to undiscipline ways of knowing... press the limits of creative praxis to engage with the political realities of this world,” and, as Dizon explained in a recent conversation, “nurture the voices of artists of color.”

Highlighting an at land's edge lecture given by the now largely unknown L.A. Rebellion filmmaker Alile Sharon Larkin, Dizon said: “the world doesn’t let people of color ‘congeal’ at art school. We need spaces for creating intergenerational communication and learning about each other’s work.” Diverse in terms of age, education, ethnicity, and also race, at land’s edge is, said Dizon, “an architecture that... we need to do again.”

Building solidarity across lines of difference, imagining and practicing ways of being together that reject status quo, nurturing imagination as a process rather than a possession, grounded in “what’s really going on:” at land's edge is just one of the many flowers that grow in the fertile soil of a larger movement for decolonization. Glimpsed through the “disruption” performed by multiplying jelly jars, their petals suggest that we have a future. For, as Haiven and Khasnabish write: “Without the radical imagination, we are left only with the residual dreams of the powerful, and for

the vast majority they are not experienced as dreams but as nightmares.” May an infinite number of flowers bloom.

Top image: Covers from The Black Panther newspaper. | Courtesy: It's About Time archive/BPP.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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